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AUTHOR Start, K. B.
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ABSTRACT

This paper challenges the belief that the only way the Australian educational system can work is by grouping students by chronological age. Chronological age developed over time as the benchmark for school readiness, despite readiness problems created by individual differences among students of the same age. The organization of the classroom, school, and educational system homogenizes children to the perceived age of the class and to the achievement floor expected of that age. Classroom variability is then reduced by structuring curriculum and schedules and by excluding atypical children through special education. A new educational system is needed to better fit the environment of sentient literacy, numeracy, and basic knowledge which exists in today's society. The removal of age-grouping should be one element of that new system. The impact of this on the education of able children includes the need for a new concept of "peer group" and the elimination of charges of "elitism" as every student's individual differences are recognized. The paper concludes that loosening of the paralyzing grip of age on educational thinking will require reappraisal of teaching methods, classroom and school organization, educational theories and administration, teacher education, and political and social belief systems. (Contains 21 references.) (JDD)

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THE TYRANNY OF AGE[1]

K. B. Start[2]

PREAMBLE

It will come as no surprise to you on this fourth day of the Conference that it is about gifted children. You are all interested in the area, see value in it, see that it needs to be developed, appreciate that there is great opposition to your views out there, but you still believe. You are the converted. We are the converted. It is easy therefore for us to look inwards rather than outwards. This morning I would like to take us outward - paraphrasing John F. Kennedy's statement "It is not what the education system should be doing for us and our interests, but what we can do for the educational system at large", and, of course, still progress our self interest.

There are things the current educational system can and should be doing for its able children. But it is not, does not want to, and probably will not, unless it can be shown that the premise on which opposition to the education of the able is based is wrong, not because it is wrong for the able, but because it is wrong for all children. After all, there are far more parents out there with "all" children than the sub-set within the all, with "able" children. Perhaps if we can show that there are changes which will benefit all (including the able), then such changes will be implemented and the very foundations of opposition to the education of the able will be taken away.

INTRODUCTION

In 1966 there appeared a very significant book, The Tyranny of Distance, by one of Australia's most eminent historians, Professor Geoffrey Blainey.

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1 Keynote address at the 8th World Conference on the Education of Gifted and Talented Children, Sydney, Australia, 3rd-7th July, 1989.

2 John Smyth Professor of Education, The University of Melbourne, Parkville, Victoria, 3052, Australia

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The book showed how the vast distances within Australia impacted on everything that has happened here. The impact has been covert as well as overt. Its existence has provided "givens" that no one challenged and assumptions which no one questioned.

With the establishment of roads, railways and air routes and the improvement from horses and camels to cars and trucks, railway rolling stock, and latterly the piston and jet aircraft, these distances have lost the tyranny and all pervasive influence they once had. It remains of course in the outback, where the transport is still sparse, but even there the light aircraft, the radio and TV satellite have eroded the dominance that distance once had. In the last hundred, certainly the last fifty and twentyfive years, the impact of distance has lessened, and its tyranny has been almost removed. It is a new world out there, with the old, given assumptions patently unnecessary.

The thrust of this paper is that in education we have experienced a similar measure of tyranny. It has had its implicit assumptions unquestioned. Its unchallenged premises have provided the foundations upon which our educational system, teaching, schooling and even learning, have been built. This morning one of these accepted foundations will be challenged, notably that of chronological age and particularly grouping by that age. The tyranny of the belief that this is the way, and the only way, an educational system can work will be challenged. Hopefully there will be sufficient food for thought for people in the audience, more erudite and innovative than I, to take the issue further. If you do, please keep me informed.

THE EMERGENCE OF AGE

The control of age over education is a relatively recent phenomenon.

Primitive people learned, and still learn, by watching the experienced competent performers, copying what they did, and practising with repeated reference to the "correct" way of doing things. Usually such procedures

follow a wholistic rather analytic route. Copying and practising continues for an unspecified time, until a passable level of competence is achieved. Apart from infants, anyone eligible in the tribe may copy, practise and perform. There was, and still is no age barrier.

With the growing sophistication of tribes, the elders who had retired from active participation, took upon themselves to teach the initiates, while the fit, competent adults actually performed the productive tasks. Apprenticeships followed the same pattern. Irrespective of age the person was indented to a "master".

In the middle ages the sons of gentry were taught as squires in someone else's castle, without them having to provide a birth certificate for admission. Competence in the individual was established by "doing" rather than by sitting for a set number of years, being taught.

The early Church schools and the Dame Schools all followed the pattern of accepting those who came forward. This tradition was continued in the one-teacher schools which were a feature, a good feature, of the Australian education in the outback and country districts. All these schools took the children as they came forward and allocated them by need and not by age. Those who could not read formed one group, those who had begun to read went into another, and those who could read were allocated to a group wherein the skill was used rather than taught.

Why then have we moved from needs to age-based education and particularly age grouping in schools? This appears to have occurred systematically at the time of the establishment of mass compulsory education.

It would seem that there was no conscious policy decision. It just happened. When the employment abuses of young children became a political question, the legislation decided to protect children from infancy to adulthood. Perhaps age was the first really well documented piece of information we had about everyone. Readiness was a non-existent concept in those days, whereas age was concrete, available and enforceable . So chronological age became the benchmark and has remained so ever since.

There have been tinkerings of course. Admission and exit ages vary from country to country and from time to time within a country.

But it was not needs, nor readiness, but "planet time", which came to govern entry, progression through and exit from the educational system, and which quickly enshrined the age criterion in schools of course.

Having legislated an age for compulsory schooling, the administrators were faced annually with an intake cohort homogeneous by age. Annually, a new wave of children appeared at the school door and the educative process began again each year for the new intake. This introduced the concept of an age floor for education. Last year's group were one year ahead and the year before's group two years ahead. The minimum age at which a child could leave school was then legislated, and an age ceiling was established by default, yet again.

As the new intake of chronologically homogeneous children entered school, those in the system had to make way for the new intake and they were thus moved "up". "Progress" or "promotion" by age or seat time became the system solution. As a result it became accepted that age and achievement, particularly intellectual achievement, were inexorably and closely linked.

But of course they are not.

INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES

The only thing similar about twelve year olds is that they have had an independent existence on this planet for 12 years. At birth they could have been "premature" or "late" babies, and certainly after that their experiences are as heterogeneous as it would be possible to be.

They differ in the physical attributes of height, weight, vision, hearing and fine and gross motor skills. They differ markedly in personality, interests, motivation, industriousness, aspiration and attribution of effect. Intellectually they differ on general and special abilities,

mental age, achievement age, speed of learning, style of learning and basic information processing.

How big are these differences? As was pointed out in the contribution to Mr. Tom Marjoram's session on Tuesday (4th July, 1989), at chronological age 12, these differences are equivalent to half the chronological age and more.

If the mental ages were based on the range of general ability scores, then at chronological age 12, at Grade/Year 7, there is a six year span. If based on national surveys of achievement the range increases to seven years (Start & Wells, 1972). Speeds of learning suggest that the 50th percentile learn 50% faster than the 25th, and the 75th learn twice as fast. In terms of the basic, seemingly innate capacity for information processing, graduate students in USA are twice as efficient as high school G12 students, who in turn are twice as efficacious as samples of the mentally impaired.

If the differences in achievement we see at G7 were caused by age alone then in the G7 class there would be children ranging from 8.5/9.5 years to 15.5 years and older. We can teach the six year span, G4 to G9, or more feasibly G7 to G12, but it is done consecutively and never concurrently in the same classroom. Our system has not grown up to teach minds but calendars. And what are we to teach them? What has been the goal of our educational system?

FLOOR EDUCATION

I would suggest that the goal of our current education system has been to take an illiterate society and give it a minimum, functional floor level in literacy, numeracy and some basic knowledge. This it has achieved very well.

Once, to be able to sign your name was the mark of an educated man. The standard rose to being able to read, then to read and write. Number was added, as was some basic simple information about the society and the

world. Not that long ago, to have completed primary education was a hallmark. Then that increased to having completed compulsory schooling. Now it seems necessary to complete full secondary schooling with ever increasing retention rates. Not long down the track, tertiary graduation might be the benchmark of the educated person.

Of course as the floor rises, the critical issue becomes not what you have achieved but what you have not. Hence not to be able to read and write in our society is more critical than being able to. Not having completed G12 is rapidly becoming a more fundamental issue than having completed it. We are looking at deficit education.

The challenge always has been to help the weakest. As the floor is established and taught, the teacher's extra attention goes to those who do not reach the minimum criterion achievement, rather than to those who do. Raising everyone to the floor competence is the criterion, and anything beyond that is icing on the cake, but relatively unimportant and certainly not deserving of much more than perfunctory attention by the teacher and society at large. In fact there can be a negative feedback if there is too open a concern for the able learner. Yet some do realise it, and then are accused of being elitist. They learn to express their concerns covertly and often out of the mainstream system, as we all know.

The focus on raising as many children as possible to the floor level means that the same achievement target is applied to all (Strong, 1989). The educational structures evolve to effect that sameness for all. How?

ENSURING SAMENESS

The organisation of the classroom, school and system homogenizes the children to the perceived age of the class and to the achievement floor expected of that age. The teaching methods clone all classmates to a particular small target group within that age class. Teacher education prepares the teacher for the narrow age-grouped classroom and the expectation of achievement by age. A set of values, attitudes and expectations evolve to reinforce these, such as "equality of outcomes" in

regard to achievement and "the peer group", both being tied to concepts of age. The school curricula and timetables are inflexible so that the individual variability to be found in children is constrained by these and is consequently severely limited. A-typical children are removed.

While these themes were developed more fully in the paper for Tom Marjoram's seminar, a little repetition for the different audience might not be inappropriate. The individual differences in intellectual functioning mentioned earlier, introduced a six year mental age range, a seven year achievement difference, speeds of learning varying by factors of two, three and four and an information processing efficacy which varies by a factor of four. How then are these differences levelled?

A-typical children

A-typicality is defined by comparison with age peers. If too different, a-typical children are removed physically or pedagogically. The removal at either end of the achievement spectrum is into alternate groups, classrooms, schools and even systems, under the guise of "special education" or "acceleration", "selection" or actually quitting the system.

For the mainstream children the remaining differences are "ironed out" and the residual just not recognised, though there may be lip service usually towards the low achiever. In fact in the typical classroom, the 20-30 children are cloned to a very narrow target group, identified as between the 10th and 25th percentile relative to that class. The clones are then taught together and identically in curriculum, time, method and expected achievement.

Then we use a self-fulfilling philosophy. They should be equal, so any inequality that remains is because of inequities, defects in the system - at home and in society. It therefore becomes the task of the school to eliminate these differences in the names of "equity" and "equality of outcomes". At least that seems to be the ruling ethic in Victoria and most of the Australian States.

The facts are made to fit the belief system and an ideology takes over. It **ought** to be this way and it damn well **will** be. Facts are never allowed to interfere with such theories as they become ideologies. If there is a clash between facts and ideology, the facts are thrown away and even the collection of the facts discontinued.

CYBERNETIC MODELS OF TEACHING

My seven year old daughter went through a phase of collecting "transformers", models of machines which, with a few deft twists of the wrist, could be turned into supermen of one form or another. That is a common concept of cybernetics - man-machines. Another is almost as much science fiction, and that is of man:machine interfaces. A third concept though relates to management, system management and the concept of control.

In management theory, control is when the outcome of a process can be guaranteed. To achieve control there must be at least as many control facets as there are environmental variables.

In the classroom the control facets lie with the teacher, and the environmental variables stem from the timetable, the curriculum and principally from the children. To control the class in the management sense of guaranteeing the outcome set for the lesson, the week, the term, the year - the teacher must have at least as many control facets as the classroom has environmental variables.

Control Facets

The number of control facets can be increased by better teachers and teaching, procured by selection, training and experience. One can also increase the number of teachers, teacher aides or adults in the classroom. Person surrogates can be used: CAI, programmed learning and the use of tapes or videos. A further method kills two birds with one stone: the use of prefects, monitors or peer teaching. That method reduces the variability in the children by reducing their number, and increases the

number of control facets of the teacher with the surrogate "teachers".

Classroom Variability

The other side of the coin, of course, is to reduce the environmental variability. The timetable is invariable. The number of hours per subject per year, per term, per week, and in some cases per day, is set. When those times are available is predetermined each year: Monday period 2, Tuesday period 3, Thursday period 5 and Friday period 4 are Maths - not only Maths but Grade 7 Maths, and not only Grade 7 Maths but that for Classes 1, 3 and 5 of Grade 7. The timetable is a powerful eliminator of classroom variability. There is no chance that Maths for C5 G7 will not be on Monday period 2, and woe betide any child in C3 G7 who tries to do anything but Maths in period 3 on Tuesdays.

Curriculum is a massive environmental limiter in the classroom. What shall be considered the school curriculum is set at the State, regional and school level. If chemistry is in, then the children will not do any content but what a select group of teachers decide shall be the content of chemistry. Not only that, they decide what will comprise the segment of that approved chemistry content for each grade. Further, chemistry will be broken down to semester or term content, then week, and the teacher's lesson book will indicate what will and will not be taught today, at least as a goal. Woe betide any child who attempts to do any chemistry which is outside the school curriculum, the year's curriculum, or even the term's or day's curricula tasks. Curriculum is a very severe limiter of the classroom variability.

However, children are the source of the greatest innate variability of the classroom. Their variability must be limited if the teacher is to have any chance of control in the management of outcomes sense. We limit class size, not that limitation has, in terms of cost, a marked impact of learning, but because teachers find it easier, and the variability of twenty is less than the variability of thirty.

A-typical children are excluded through special education at one end of the

spectrum, and acceleration out of the class, school or system at the other. Then we treat the remaining members of the class of twentyfour, not as twentyfour individuals but as one individual twentyfour times.

Focus of Cloning

We clone children to the target group defined by the 10th-25th percentile of the specific class (Lundgren, 1972). That assures teachers of the 80-85% pass percentage which seems to be a feature both of teacher self-reports and scientific observation. Nothing is taught, no method used, no speed employed if they are beyond the capacity of 80-85 percent of the class. All the children are taught as though that group was, and actually is, the pacer.

Those few individuals (10-15%) who find the going tough, are usually given some help under the guise of coping with individual difference in the classroom. The high fliers are usually ignored or put on additional tasks under the name of enrichment until the teacher returns them to the next step in the mainstream curriculum, for which the target group is now ready.

The educational system and society reward teachers with recognition of a deserved "warm glow" for those who help the slow learners, and berate those who express concern for the high fliers, as we know all too well. Both this "reward" and "punishment" for teachers, serve to ensure the reduction of pupil variability.

The primary school often does extend beyond the secondary school cloning of twentyfour to one, by having learning tables: perhaps four to six for reading and maths, usually selected by level of performance. So there are such things as the koalas and the bandicoots for reading, and the wallaby and kangaroo tables for maths. Having six tables enables the teacher to have six "children", each then is cloned four or five times. So all the bandicoots are treated as identical, and all the kangaroos suffer the same fate. The goal has been achieved. The variability of the children in the classroom has been reduced.

So the whole structure of the classroom, the teaching method and before that, of course, the teacher education, are designed to cater not for the individual differences in the children but for the very opposite - to give the teacher skills in limiting and controlling that variability. The teacher identifies the target group between the 10th-25th percentiles, and teaches that class as if they were all of that ilk and such that 80-85 percent "get" whatever is the message of the teacher-pupil interaction.

The existence of this target subgroup, and the method of cloning to it, offers an explanation for a number of things in schooling: why class size, down to 10-15, has little impact on individual learning achievement; why teachers take a settling-in time to get to know the class and why experienced and good teachers do it more quickly than inexperienced or weak teachers; and why teachers settle as teachers of bright, average or slow classes after years - because the target group is not absolute but relative to the class, whatever its intellectual quality, and this has moulded if not frozen, the teachers' style.

The cybernetic model also offers explanations for the well-known phenomenon that the freedom (variability) in a class is allowed to expand when the teacher feels in control, this time in the discipline sense, and why freedom is quickly withdrawn when the teacher feels that control is being lost. On a good day what teacher does not tolerate a little more conversation, movement and even curriculum variation in the classroom, as well as more teacher/pupil individual interaction? On a bad day its: "Books out" (ALL of you)!; "Turn to page 123" (ALL of you)! "John! You read" (Saves me, and I am going to watch the class)! "Rest of the class, listen" (ALL of you)! The "all of you" implies cloning: one instruction, one meaning, one identical response from 24 "identical" bodies.

DAWKINS' MEME THEORY

Dawkins wrote a book in 1976, called "The Selfish Gene". It was a development from Darwin's (1859), theory of The Origin of Species. Dawkins postulated that it was the gene not the individual or species which was

involved in the competition for survival. In fact, Dawkins postulated that the individual and the species were but "vehicles", as he put it, for the gene's survival.

In one of the concluding chapters, Dawkins suggested that there was another environment and another competition for survival which also depended on the best fit between the entity and its environment. Dawkins' originality however, was to postulate that this new enviroment is recent and non-physical - that provided within the minds created by the evolution of a sentient species, man. The reproducing entity he postulated was the "meme" which functioned in that sapient environment. A "meme" is the technical name for what you or I might call an idea.

"Memes", like genes, individuals and species survived if they best fitted the particular environment in which they dwelt. Again like genes, memes had complex vehicles to help them survive; these were theories, systems, laws and the like, such as the religions, or political theories. Dawkins held that ideas grew and prospered when they best fitted the current general or more specific sentient environment. Given a good fit between the meme and its sentient environment the meme would survive, thrive and expand into other suitable environments.

Importantly, he also suggested that like genes and their vehicles, the species, they would fight off any challenge for their "territory". One has but to recall the physical wars which differences in religion, in political theory and even economic theories have engendered in the last 5,000 years to see some support for that view. Of course the tensions do not have to be physical, as we all know from the clash of viewpoints (memes?) at the committee meetings we have all attended.

The final point Dawkins made is that just as the gene and its species adapts or perishes when faced with a changed physical environment and a new, better fitted challenger, so, said Dawkins, do memes in their sentient environment. Theories either have to modify to accommodate new irreconcilable facts, or the theories are abandoned. Ideologies, like dinosaurs, reject the facts (Heath, 1989) and become increasingly dangerous

or pathetic when viewed against the changing environment, respectively sentient and physical. Ideologies and theories do not go without a fight though, as evidenced in the transcripts of the meeting of the Linnean Society at which Darwin presented his theory of evolution (Darwin & Wallace, 1858). The battle of the memes and their theories for survival parallels similar battles of the genes and their species.

Current Educational System as a Meme

The original sentient environment was that created by an illiterate, innumerate and uninformed society and the need was to make it literate, numerate and informed. The current educational system was the best fit (fitted) to that environment, so it expanded rapidly and became the dominant meme (Start, 1988). Its survival vehicles: teachers, schools, curricula, timetables, administrations and educational systems, all reflected the meme's nature - minimum competency was to be achieved by all. So all could be grouped as one and taught. Dependent and interdependent memes arose, bringing the concepts closer together into a network, perhaps a security blanket.

But man's increasingly effective communication channels have changed the sentience of society and therefore the environment for ideas and memes. The first effective communication was through trade and copying, or conquest and imposition. Now communication is worldwide through the mass media and communication satellites in space.

The meme of universal minimum competency in literacy and numeracy is now faced with a different (sentient) environment - that of literate and numerate minds with a reasonable knowledge and skill base. The environment has changed. The old educational meme is ill adapted to the new sentient environment and will resist it and change. A new educational meme will evolve to dominance. But it will rise over the "dead body" of the established, dominant meme - the current educational system.

The sentient environment has changed significantly, perhaps too much for the old system's capacity to adapt. If so, both Darwin and Dawkins would

argue that a new meme will develop and become dominant because it will be a better fit with the new environment.

Of course, the current (old?) system, in its fight for survival, could endeavour to move the focus of education from literacy and numeracy (cognitive areas) to other areas in which the sentient environment is still primitive. It could try to focus society on less precise more contentious matters such as social, political, aesthetic and value outcomes (Gross, 1989). It could endeavour to make "breadth" and "enrichment", rather than "depth" and "acceleration", the goals to be followed. It certainly will be a strategy used.

If that side or blind alley can be avoided then a new meme, the basis of a new educational system will emerge, develop and succeed because it fits better the environment of sentient literacy, numeracy and basic knowledge which now exists in today's society. Its task will be to maximise the development of the members of that literate and numerate society, which is a totally different task to that of taking an illiterate society and giving it minimum competency.

With the sentient environment changing to a literate, numerate, informed mind-set, the justification has gone for cloning individuals, for minima, for equality of outcomes and for creating "sameness". Now the major impediment to destabilising the current meme, age grouping, should be removed. But it will be hard to remove.

It has become the pivot of many other inter-dependent memes, and its removal will put them into disarray. These dependent memes will not "like" that, so they will oppose such a change as long as there is a chance that the current dominating educational system (meme), can win out or stave off the newcomer.

It is the basis of school organisation, and the removal of age-grouping will mean that something has to be put in its place. How shall a child be admitted to school? How will the school facilitate the individual child's progress through the experiences for which she/he is in school and maximise

her/her development in the process? How will the curriculum have to be adjusted? Ironically perhaps that will need the least of all adjustment.

How will teaching methods alter? It will have to be a dramatic change from teaching different grade levels in sequence to teaching them concurrently in the same class. That is if the class structure is retained. If classroom and school structures, and teaching methods change, teacher education will have to change and that will put the Faculties of Education in turmoil.

How will teacher attitudes change? Phenomenally. But I have great faith in the flexibility of teachers, if little in that of their industrial organisations (Sheridan, 1989). Less adjustment will be needed by the administration, as given a new system meme, administer it they will.

Theorists may have the greatest problems, especially those espousing memes such as "equity", "equality", "disadvantage", "disability" - memes which appear to delight those more interested in the problem than its resolution: in studying the syndrome, than in curing it.

All these issues will have to be thought through again and again. They will have to become more related to the needs of individuals rather than explained away by the use of large scale models of class, and groups such as ethnic or disadvantaged. There will be a place for such concepts, but they will have to be in relation to maximising the individual rather than in the social engineering of groups. Problems will be posed for all professionals associated with education. Psychologists will have to rethink things such as "norms", "intelligence", "peer groups" and the like. Sociologists will have to look at the significance to the individual of socio-economic status, gender, disadvantage, the class war and all its problems.

DISPERSING THE OBJECTIONS TO THE EDUCATION OF ABLE CHILDREN

If we could eliminate the tyranny imposed by age grouping as the absolute rule it would have a tremedous impact on the education of all children including that of the able. We would of course have to rethink many things.

How would children be admitted to schools, that is if schools as we know them survive? They almost certainly will, and will be very similar to what they are today.

How do we ensure that the child passes through school experiences at optimal rate? Will classrooms be retained? Will homogeneity be retained? If so on what will it be based?

How do we decide that a child is "ready" to leave school? At the minimum level perhaps an age ceiling will be necessary as achievement ceilings would have to be meaningful. Some children might not reach them unless the curricula they meet becomes increasing tailored to improving basic competence. Of course there is the "test out" facility being introduced in many American States so that a student may leave once basic (floor) competence has been demonstrated. Should a maximum age for compulsory retention be established? Should a child who learns quickly move into another educational context such as a college or should the educational content of that context be brought to the child? Perhaps the contexts should be mixed, both child and context move as deemed appropriate.

If all children were allowed to progress at their own optimum rate/learning method/style without reference to age, where does it leave the question of gifted children and the arguments for and against their full development?

OBJECTIONS

Peer Group

"Gifted children lose by being moved out of their peer group". But who is

their peer group? If peer groups are not age enforced as they are today, who will comprise a child's peer group in the new context? We, as the informed audience, know that chronology is not the determinant of the peer group of an intellectually able child. It is much more likely to be formed with like minded souls of high ability, achievements, attitudes to work and similar interests. Usually the bright youngster is to be found among older children.

The concept of age peers as the dominant grouping does appear dependent on the age grouping derived from school. In fact the close homogenising of age found in schools is contrary to every other form of grouping found outside school either formally or informally. The tightness with which the "age peer" concept is enforced at school is quite artifical and could be quite deleterious if we really think about it. We are forcing children into age-peer relations, friendships and bonding because their most intense, lengthy and easy contacts are those derived from the artificial situation of age-bound classrooms in schools.

The argument about acceleration and social disturbance will have no relevance. The argument might well be reversed: that it is socially and emotionally damaging to retain a child below its optimum learning environment. Bear in mind that school is the only occasion in one's life where one is forced to select "peers" from chronologically similar if not identical persons. In fact the peer grouping we have created by age grouping in schools is unique in a child/individual's experience. Having imposed it through education we have come to believe it is natural and deviations from it somehow put the child at risk. We have come to believe our own publicity.

Who would be a child's peers if age grouping ceased in schools? We do not know because the first premise has never been challenged. But then in talking to a psychotic individual if one accepts his first premise, what follows is logical. If there is a ray gun on the moon focused at your head, and against which the wearing of a bowler hat at all times protects you, you would be a madman to go outside without a bowler hat.

What if we reject the first premise of the current educational system, that children must be grouped by age? Perhaps we could take off our bowler hats.

"Elitist"

What will that come to mean? Will it be elitist to be different? But everyone will be different? We will be dealing with individuals and not cloned groups of children. How will a tall poppy be measured so that her head can be lopped? If she is not in a group of age peers with a six year range of ability/achievement, not in a group forced to move at the same pace which is too quick for a minority and too slow for most, how will she stand out? If she moves through curricula optimally, and the exchange between her and her educational contexts are fluid and not age driven, where is the beef?

"Narrowness"

How narrow can the curriculum be if everyone motors through it at their own pace and using their preferred learning style? All that is feasible now in terms of faster progression or acceleration, broader bases or enrichment and different levels of cognitive functioning and style will all be there and for everyone.

"Snobs"

Again since the artificiality of the age grouping is removed, over whom will the able child "lord it"? Not that there is any evidence to suggest that, in fact, even in the current system able children have these attributes any more than children with average or below average achievement. In fact it appears to be the opposite. Once given the chance to follow their own optimal development able children become more not less tolerant, of others and even themselves as their self concept appears to rise. That should come as no surprise to us as all children would have a better self image if they were allowed to develop optimally and feel successful and not thwarted.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Gifted children are a minority group. Despite the findings of the Senate Select Committee (May, 1989) that they are one of the most disadvantaged groups of children in Australia, governments, teachers' unions and bureaucracies do not see it that way. Facts appear to be making little inroads into the belief systems of these three groups who run the educational system. Unless we can show that all children can benefit from a change which will allow able children full development, then that change will be slow in coming , if it ever does within mainstream education particularly State education.

It has been suggested in this paper that to challenge the tyranny of age criteria for education, and the particular tyranny of age grouping of children, would release inordinate benefits for all children who would be able to progress optimally to full development, at their own pace and along their own preferred channels.

Something which would benefit all would benefit the able child directly and indirectly by removing the most commonly used grounds for denying optimal development of the able - age linked peer, social, personality, equality and equity criticisms.

Removal, even an initial loosening of the paralysing grip of age on our educational thinking, will require reappraisal of teaching methods, classroom and school organisation, educational theories and administration, teacher education and finally political and social belief systems.

Such a concern for all children will remove the advocates of education of able children from a perceived narrowness of pushing their own limited barrow. In fact they will be pushing a barrow in which will be all children - but critically, and with the support of the majority, the able children will be released from the prejudices and limitation under which they currently labour.

Finally those in the gifted movement will have responded to the Kennedy injunction and offered to all what they want for themselves.

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